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ABSTRACT

Focusing particularly on messages transmitted by socializing agents in preschool settings, this exploratory study investigates (1) the incidence of communication events in which standards for achievement are expressed, (2) the nature of the standards, and (3) variations across settings in the nature of standard-setting events. The relationship of across-setting variations to differences in tasks, age differences of children, and differences between programs was also investigated. Data was collected through naturalistic observation in six preschool classroom learning centers in three day care centers. Ninety-eight 5 minute recordings of observations of learning centers were coded for presence of achievement standards and for a number of behaviors related to the setting of standards, such as teachers' evaluations and children's bids for teacher attention. Categories of tasks and standards were developed from a content analysis of the observational records. Tasks observed involved art project, creative art, practical cooking, perceptual-motor, and "cognitive/school" preparation activities. Standards were coded in terms of (1) any standard, (2) correctness, (3) practical workability, (4) aesthetic, (5) creativity, (6) speed, and (7) modeling of product or process. Due to the exploratory nature of this investigation and the infrequent occurrence of many variables, only descriptive data of frequency of occurrence is given. Findings are discussed. (RH)

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Demands Upon Children Regarding Quality of Achievement: Standard Setting in Preschool Classrooms

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This study describes the ways in which expectations for competence or standards are presented to young children in nursery schools, viewing this process as an important part of socializing children into the achievement expectations of school. Of special interest are the ways in which teachers communicate to the child that his/her work has not met the standards, and that it is inadequate. It is assumed that the nature of standards will vary across tasks, and that information given to students will be dependent upon such factors as the clarity of standards for the particular task, the child's age and competence, the task area, and the teacher's philosophy.

An important part of the socialization of children into the achievement aspect of school settings is to teach them to hold appropriate standards for their work. Achievement behavior is defined as "behavior directed toward the attainment of approval or the avoidance of disapproval (from oneself or others) for competence of performance in situations in which standards of excellence are applicable" (Crandall et al 1960). Standards of excellence or criteria for competence of performance are thus an intrinsic part of all school achievement. Dreeben (1968) describes the process by which children come to accept the premise that they should do as well as they can as basic to the conventional organization of classroom activities, in which teachers assign work to pupils and then evaluate the quality of their performance. Built into this customary pattern is the necessity that children learn to cope with various degrees of success and failure in the social context of the classroom.

Just as learning to cope with success and failure is problematic for students, setting the standards for performance that will result in a performance's evaluation as successful or not is a problem for teachers. Teachers have been traditionally taught that pupils need to have success experiences and positive reinforcements for their school work, in order to provide incentives that will encourage continued achievement striving. They have also been taught that they must hold high expectations for students and demand striving and excellence, so that children will learn what a good job is and come to experience the real satisfaction and growth in competence that comes from the expenditure of a great effort at a difficult task. As Hartup (1964) describes, the problem of what and how much to demand of a child is a central concern of applied child psychology.

Although theory and experimental research suggests the importance of how standards are set, and despite the pervasiveness of standard setting in schools, we know little of how this process actually takes place in classrooms. Some limited information regarding praise and criticism is embedded in classroom interaction studies, but no research has focused specifically on what standards teachers use and how they communicate them to students. This uses Ruble's (1980) framework for describing developmental variables most likely to affect childrens' achievement-related perceptions and behaviors. Ruble's model includes the child's concepts regarding achievement and his abilities to process and integrate information as cognitive variables. Social-environmental variables include such factors as age-related shifts in the messages received from socializing agents.

This study focuses on the social-environmental aspects of her model, and particularly on messages received from socializing agents in schools. Additional theories regarding evaluation processes (e.g., Veroff et al, 1975, Weiner, 1974; Veroff, 1969; Crandall, et al., 1960; Meux, 1963) have also identified dimensions of standards that have been used to guide this study.

The study attempted to answer two basic questions about the presentation of standards to children in preschool classrooms:

1) What is the occurrence of standard setting events, and the nature of the standards that are presented?
2) What variations occur between settings in the nature of standard setting events, and can any variations be attributed to differences in tasks, age differences of children, or differences between programs?

Method and Data Source:

This study used the method of naturalistic observation. Learning centers in which teachers were present were observed in preschool classrooms. Each center was observed in random order for 5 minutes, and information regarding the center was recorded by an observer. Interaction regarding achievement was also recorded in writing. Immediately following the observation, observations were reread and coded for information regarding standard setting and evaluation processes.

Ninety-eight five minute records of observations of learning centers comprise the data source for this study. The records were obtained from six preschool classrooms in three day care centers. Two schools served a middle class population, and one served a mixed population including some disadvantaged children. All describe themselves as offering developmentally

oriented preschool programs. Their major instructional programs were provided at learning centers, which generally consisted of activities prepared by the teachers, who placed appropriate materials on tables which could accommodate several children. Children were free to select a center of their choice, although occasionally coercion was applied.

Two of the preschool classrooms were at a University laboratory day care center, and served the children of students as well as the general public. Another classroom observed was for 3 to 4½ year olds, and was conducted at a church sponsored day care center, most of whose students' parents were employed in professional occupations. The final center was sponsored by a school district and provided developmental day care on a sliding fee scale basis. The primary purpose of the center was to prevent school failure of disadvantaged groups, but middle class children were also included in the program. Two classrooms observed here were for 3-4 year olds, and one was for 5 year olds.

Data treatment:

Records of observations at centers were coded for presence of achievement standards and for a number of behaviors related to the setting of standards. Each of the 98 centers was coded for presence or absence of a behavior. Most of the five minute observations of centers yielded more than one of the behaviors of interest. In addition, a single behavior might be coded for more than one category (eg. "Beautiful" was both a positive evaluation and an indication that an aesthetic standard was being applied).

Categories of tasks and standards were developed from a content analysis of the observational records. Tasks observed were: 1) Art project - A structured creative activity with boundaries circumscribed by the teacher,

for example making a lion face out of a pie plate, or making Christmas ornaments from a given set of materials; 2) Creative art - Open art activity, generally drawing, painting, or working with clay; 3) Practical cooking - Activities generally associated with homemaking, such as cleaning. Food preparation was by far the most common practical activity; 4) Perceptual-motor - Gross or fine motor activity or puzzles. 5) Cognitive, school preparation - Activities stressing matching, counting, writing, and including preparation of experience charts.

Standards were coded as being present if even a vague reference to a rationale for evaluation was given. For example, a teacher's evaluation of a product as "pretty" was coded as being an aesthetic rationale, and an admonition to use less glue was coded as giving a practical standard . It should be noted that almost all standards were vague and cursory, and that there was very little explication of the rationales for evaluation. Standards were coded as follows: 1) Any standard is a superordinate category indicating the presence of one of the standards coded as follows (2-7); 2) Correctness - The presence or absence of a single or convergent right answer was the basis upon which evaluation was made (eg. "How many are there? You missed, one, see."); 3) Practical workability - included a variety of standards that were based on realistic desired outcomes, (eg. "Not so much sugar or the cookies won't turn out." or "Hold the grater so it won't cut you.") 4) Aesthetic - if attractiveness was the specified criterion; 5) Creativity - if the product or process was evaluated on the basis of originality (eg. "Great! The only green Santa's beard I ever saw.") 6) Speed - if the effort was evaluated as being completed quickly or slowly. 7) Model of product or process - included

learning centers in which a model of a finished product prepared either by the teacher or a peer served as the standard for desired work. It also was used for centers in which the teacher modeled a desired process, (eg. "Hold the cup this way, and fill it right to the line like this.")

If a teacher merely said "Good job," this was not considered to be a standard, but if she commented on in what way she considered the job to be good or not good, a standard was coded. Sometimes a learning center was not coded as having a standard present, although everyone present seemed to share an implicit assumption that a certain criterion was being applied. This was especially true for the correctness standard, which was often present without being mentioned, as when the teacher ignored wrong answers and replied "good" when she got the desired response.

Since learning centers had rotating populations of class members, the age level given indicates the age level of the classroom observed. Age level 3-4 includes 3 classrooms, age level 4, one classroom, and age level 5 includes two classrooms. Each classroom had from 2 to 7 teachers, and there was insufficient data to analyze individual teacher behaviors. Analysis of classrooms was done, but again the small numbers in some cells made meaningful interpretation difficult. Due to the exploratory nature of this investigation and the infrequency of occurrence of many variables, only descriptive data of frequency of occurrence is given. Tests of statistical significance were judged inappropriate, and are not reported.

Findings

Occurrence and nature of standards

As Table 1a indicates, mention of standards in learning centers is a frequent event, occurring in 83.7% of the centers observed. The incidence of this event is consistently high across schools. Examination of the nature of standards used shows Practical Workability to be the most commonly used standard, followed by the use of Model of Process or Product and by Correctness. Achievement was judged very infrequently by criteria of Creativity or Speed. Differences between schools are evident in the kinds of standards used, but this may be due to differences in the kinds of tasks observed in the learning centers (Table 5). As Table 1b shows while the use of standards is high across tasks, particular standards used vary by task, largely in predictable ways. For example, Aesthetic standards are found exclusively in art activities, and Correctness is most frequently used in school preparation activities in which there tends to be one right answer. The standard of Practical Workability, most commonly found in practically oriented tasks, is used commonly in a range of activities.

Age differences in the use of standards are shown in Table 1c, and indicate great consistency in the frequency of use of standards across age groups. This may be due to the narrow age ranges of the classes studied, and the lack of specific age-related curricular emphasis in the learning centers in the classrooms observed. There are age variations in the specific kinds of standards used, but no particular trends are seen. Indeed, the

standards Practical Workability and Model of Process or Product that would seem especially appropriate to the efforts of younger children were seen as often or more often in classrooms for older children.

Occasions for standard setting - evaluations and children's bids

Observations confirmed that the assignment-performance-evaluation sequence noted by Dreeben (1968) in public schools is also present in preschool classroom learning centers. However, the continued presence of the teacher and the turnover of children participating in the center made this a more cyclical process than he described, with teachers immediately evaluating performance and revising their instructions based on the child's level of success. Standards were more generally observed during the evaluation of children's efforts (in 49% of centers) than during the initial instruction (36.7% of centers). Indeed, one would expect that it is when achievement must be evaluated that standards for this evaluation become an issue, particularly for young children who tend to focus on their own concrete and immediate product or activity.

Tables 3a, 3b, and 3c describe the occurrence of evaluations of work as Right (meeting standards) or Wrong (not meeting standards), and whether or not the standard was mentioned during the evaluation. Teachers indicated a child's achievement was Right during 73.5% of centers, and that it was Wrong during 55.1% of the centers. Thus positive and negative evaluations are a frequent occurrence in centers. It is noteworthy that standards were given for relatively more of the Wrong evaluations than the Right ones, since teachers feel more constrained to explain their negative remarks. Positive evaluations frequently consisted of a global "Good" or "Good job", without any explanation. While teachers did occasionally tell a child directly that

his/her work was wrong or not good enough, they more frequently couched their negative evaluation in terms of instruction to finish the task or to redo the task a little differently. The fact that this was interpreted as a negative evaluation was seen on one occasion in which the teacher asked a child to repeat a correctly done task. The little girl appeared confused until the teacher explained that she had done it right, the teacher just wanted her to do it a second time.

Table 2b and 2c show that there are differences in occurrence of positive and negative evaluations by task and age of child. Negative evaluations occur most frequently in practical activities and in school preparation activities, the two areas in which teachers have less latitude for stretching standards to let poor or innacurate products pass as acceptable. As children get older, they are given more positive relative to negative evaluations, perhaps a reflection of their increasing competence (although one would expect that curricular decisions could be used to manipulate this ratio of positive to negative feedback). Positive feedback is also frequently given in practical and school preparation activities, a reflection of the frequently necessary practice of having children redo such tasks until they are done right.

Two common bids for teacher attention were observed in the learning centers. In one, the child solicited the teacher's attention to a finished product, saying "See" or "Look, teacher", and requiring the teacher's response to what the child seemed to believe was a competent effort or product. As Tables 3a, b, and c indicate, such bids show great variability across settings, tasks, and age levels, and are most common for art activities. The second

kind of bid, in which the child says he cannot do what is asked, is less common but is also variable across settings, tasks, and age levels. Differences are difficult to interpret, and may reflect social conventions within a classroom, in addition to either perceived competence or inability to meet standards.

Attributions of qualities to children or tasks on the basis of performance

Although genuine attributions of causality for success or failure (Weiner 1974) other than "I can't" are difficult to find in preschool classes, what may be a cognitively less sophisticated precursor of such attributions is seen in the teacher's statements in which past or present task performance reflects upon the competence or effort of the child or the difficulty of the task. Tables 4a, b, and c indicate these events. They show that teachers most frequently praise the child's skill or ability "What a good thinker you are!", and next most frequently excuse failure with reference to task difficulty. Children's effort is rarely mentioned. It is noteworthy that teachers were never observed to comment negatively on the child's ability or effort, or to say a task was easy. Age differences suggest that there was a tendency for teachers to comment positively on child skill more frequently for older children, and to mention task difficulty less often for older children.

Discussion

The study indicates that the presence of achievement standards and the need to cope with the success and failure they engender is a pervasive feature of life in preschool classrooms. However, unless the task was one

with a single right answer, or one in which competent performance had a practical consequence, such as cooking, teachers did not discuss their standards in any detail. They frequently gave a rationale for evaluation (eg. "Beautiful!" indicating an aesthetic rationale) without giving the children present any idea of the specific criteria to be applied, and how other products might also meet with approval. Often, teachers evaluated by giving global approval ("Good." or "Good job.") without supplying a reason for the positive evaluation. Teachers occasionally informed children that their use of materials was incorrect ("Too much glue."), without providing a reason or a standard for more appropriate use of materials. The gross coding method used, in which a learning center was recorded as showing a standard being present if one was observed at any time during the five minute observation, obscures the frequency with which teachers did not note standards when they might well have done so.

It should also be noted that standards were defined quite loosely for the present study. Also, the only observations occurred at teacher-present learning centers. This may not give an accurate picture of all the events in a classroom, and may cause some distortion of findings across settings due to variation in teacher presence. For example, some rooms had children working alone at easels or at pre-reading tasks, who were not observed although they did receive intermittent instruction, evaluation, and probably information on how their work met or did not meet standards.

Although the small sample precluded detailed analysis, the findings suggest that variations in standard-setting events across classrooms are

due more to the nature of the task, and to a limited extent to the age of the child, than to teacher differences except for differences in curriculum. There appears to be a conventional unarticulated wisdom about how one sets and communicates standards to preschoolers. Further research is needed that would examine this phenomenon in more detail, including investigation of children's interpretation of their teachers' communications regarding standards. Study might also be profitably done in elementary school classrooms, where standards for evaluation are doubtless more rigid, and formalized evaluations become more well-defined and crucial events in children's lives.

Certainly the giving and receiving of approval and disapproval for achievement are frequent and emotionally salient occurrences for preschool teachers and children. Despite this, the way teachers establish and communicate the performance standards that result in the judgement of an action as a success or failure has not been given much attention. Further research into this area will eventually permit us to suggest strategies for setting and communicating standards that are appropriate to the child's level of cognitive development and to our goals for him, so that we may more effectively encourage children to strive to achieve.

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Tables 1a, b, c

Occurrences of Achievement Standards in Learning Centers

Table 1a) Total Group and by School

Standard	Total group 98 Centers	School district sponsored 45 Centers	University sponsored 36 Centers	Church sponsored 17 Centers
Any standard	(82) 83.7%	(36) 80%	(31) 86.1%	(15) 88.2%
Correctness	(21) 21.4%	(8) 17.8%	(4) 11.1%	(9) 52.9%
Practical Workability	(35) 35.7%	(19) 42.2%	(13) 36.1%	(3) 17.6%
Aesthetic	(16) 16.3%	(5) 11.1%	(8) 22.2%	(3) 17.6%
Creativity	(4) 4.1%	(3) 6.7%	(1) 2.8%	(0) 0%
Speed	(5) 5.1%	(3) 6.7%	(0) 0%	(2) 11.8%
Model given of product or process	(25) 25.5%	(11) 24.4%	(11) 30.6%	(3) 17.6%

Table 1b) by task

Standard	Art project 43 Centers	Creative Art (draw, paint) 10 Centers	Practical, Cook 10 Centers	Perceputal Motor 6 Centers	Cognitive School Preparation 20 Centers
Any standard	(39) 90.7%	(8) 80.0%	(15) 78.9%	(4) 66.7%	(16) 80%
Correctness	(7) 16.2%	0 0%	1 5.2%	1 16.7%	12 60%
Practical Workability	(16) 37.2%	(4) 40.0%	(12) 63.2%	(1) 16.7%	(2) 10%
Aesthetic	(11) 25.6%	(5) 50.0%	(0) 0	(0) 0	(0) 0
Creativity	(4) 9.36%	(0) 0%	(0) 0%	(0) 0%	(0) 0%
Speed	(1) 2.33%	(0) 0%	(1) 5.26%	(0) 0%	(3) 15%
Model given of product or process	(15) 34.9%	(0) 0%	(6) 31.6%	(2) 33.3%	(2) 10%

Number in parenthesis is number of centers in which standard occurred
percentage is the percentage of centers in which standard occurred

Table 1c) by Age level

Standards	Age level Age 3-4 32 Centers	Age 4 22 Centers	Age 5 44 Centers
Any standard	(28) 84.8%	(18) 85.7%	(36) 81.8%
Correctness	(12) 36.6%	(2) 9.5%	(7) 15.9%
Practical Workability	11 33.3%	(8) 38.1%	17 36.4%
Aesthetic	(4) 12.1%	(4) 19.0%	(8) 18.2%
Creativity	(2) 6.1%	(0) 0%	(2) 45.5%
Speed	(2) 6%	(0) 0%	(3) 6.8%
Model given of product or process	(5) 15.2%	(9) 42.8%	(11) 25%

Number in parenthesis is number of centers in which standard occurred
percentage is the percentage of centers in which standard occurred

Tables 2A, B, C

Occurrence of Types of Evaluation and Evaluation Noting Standards in Learning Centers

Evaluation	Total 98 Centers	School District Sponsored 45 Centers	University Sponsored 36 Centers	Church Sponsored 17 Centers
Right	(72) 73.5%	(32) 71.1%	(26) 72.2%	(14) 82.3%
Right noting standards	(34) 34.7%	(14) 31.1%	(12) 33.3%	(8) 47.0%
Wrong	(54) 55.1%	(28) 62.2%	(16) 44.4%	(10) 58.8%
Wrong noting standards	(32) 32.6%	(15) 33.3%	(12) 33.3%	(5) 29.4%

2B) by Task

Evaluation	Art Project 43 Centers	Creative art (draw, paint) 10 Centers	Practical cook 19 Centers	Perceptual motor 6 Centers	Cognitive School preparation 20 Centers
Right	(29) 67.4%	(6) 60%	(14) 73.7%	(6) 100%	(17) 85%
Right noting standards	(18) 41.9%	(3) 30%	(5) 26.3%	(2) 33.3%	(6) 30%
Wrong	(22) 51.2%	(4) 40%	(12) 63.2%	(3) 50%	(13) 65%
Wrong noting standards	(11) 25.6%	(4) 40%	(9) 47.4%	(1) 16.7%	(7) 35%

2C) by Age level

Evaluation	Age 3-4 32 Centers	Age 4 22 Centers	Age 5 44 Centers
Right	(23) 69.7%	(13) 61.9%	(36) 81.8%
Right noting standards	(11) 33.3%	(5) 23.8%	(18) 40.9%
Wrong	(22) 66.7%	(10) 47.6%	(22) 50%
Wrong noting standards	(13) 39.4%	(7) 33.3%	(12) 27.3%

Number in parenthesis is number of centers in which evaluation occurred
Percentage is the percentage of centers in which evaluation occurred

Tables 3A, B, C

Occurrence of Type at Child Bids in Learning Centers

Table 3A) Total and by School

Bid	Total 98 Centers	School District Sponsored 45 Centers	University Sponsored 36 Centers	Church Sponsored 17 Centers
Solicits evaluation	(27) 27.5%	(8) 17.8%	(16) 44.4%	(3) 17.6%
Claims Inability	(15) 15.3%	(6) 13.3%	(7) 19.4%	(2) 11.7%

Table 3B) by Task

Bid	Art Project 43 Centers	Creative art draw, paint 10 Centers	practical, cook 19 Centers	perceptual motor 6 Centers	cognitive school preparation 20 Centers
solicits evaluation	(18) 41.9	(5) 50.6	(2) 10.5%	(1) 16.7%	(1) 5%
claims inability	(8) 18.6%	(2) 20%	(1) 5.3%	(0) 0%	(4) 20%

Table 3C) by Age level

Bid	Age 3-4 32 Centers	Age 4 22 Centers	Age 5 44 Centers
solicits evaluation	(7) 21.2%	(13) 61.9%	(7) 15.9%
claims inability	(4) 12.2%	(5) 23.8%	(6) 13.6%

Number in parenthesis is number of centers which bid occurred
Percentage is the percentage at centers in which bid occurred

Tables 4A, B, C

Occurrence of Teacher's Attribution of Qualities to Child or Task in Learning Centers

Table 4A) Total and by School

Attribution	Total 98 Centers	School District Sponsored 45 Centers	University Sponsored 36 Centers	Church Sponsored 17 Centers
Positive child skill or ability	(17) 17.4%	(8) 17.8%	(7) 19.4%	(2) 11.8%
Positive child effort	(5) 5.1%	(5) 11.1%	(0) 0%	(0) 0%
Task difficulty	(9) 9.2%	(4) 8.9%	(0) 0%	(5) 29.4%

Table 4B by Task

Attribution	Art Project 43 Centers	Creative Art (draw, paint) 10 Centers	practical cook 19 Centers	perceptual motor 6 Centers	cognitive school preparation 20 Centers
Positive child skill, ability	(6) 13.9	(0) 0%	(4) 21.%	(2) 33.3%	(5) 25%
Positive child effort	(2) 4.6%	(0) 0%	(2) 10.5%	(0) 0%	(1) 5%
Task difficulty	(4) 9.3%	(0) 0%	(1) 5.26%	(1) 16.7%	(3) 15%

Table 4C) by Age level

Attribution	Age 3-4 32 Centers	Age 4 22 Centers	Age 5 44 Centers
Positive child skill, ability	(3) 9.1%	(5) 23.8%	(9) 20.5%
positive child effort	(1) 3.1%	(0) 0%	(4) 9.1%
Task difficulty	(6) 18.2%	(0) 0%	(3) 6.8%

Number in parenthesis is number of centers in which attribution occurred
Percentage is the percentage at centers in which attribution occurred

Table 5

Tasks at Learning Centers Observed
in Three Schools

Task	School District Sponsored 45 Centers	University Sponsored 36 Centers	Church Sponsored 17 Centers
Art project	(24) 53.3%	(13) 36.1%	(6) 35.3%
Creative art	(1) 2.2%	(9) 25%	(0) 0%
Practical	(12) 26.7%	(7) 19.4%	(0) 0%
Perceptual motor	(0) 0%	(5) 13.9%	(1) 5.8%
Cognitive	(8) 17.8%	(2) 5.56%	(10) 58.8%

Number in parenthesis is number of centers
Percentage is percentage at centers at school for each task